

Sunday, October 19, 2025

The Nineteenth Sunday After Pentecost

Festal Evensong

4:00 pm

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A Sermon by

The Rev. Preston Gonzalez-Grissom

on

John 16:1-11

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The Gift of Jesus' Absence

I come to you in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

This evening in our New Testament reading, we find Jesus a little more than halfway into his farewell discourse. In John's Gospels, between Chapter 13 and 17, give or take, where Jesus is preparing his closest disciples for his impending death, and eventually for his leaving to go be with the father. It's his last formal teaching to his disciples, and he's already told them that he's leaving, but they don't quite seem to get it.

Peter says, how can we go with you just a few chapters before? He doesn't understand, but Jesus goes on teaching. In the chapter before this, he gives the famous parable, I am the vine, you are the branches, abide in me, I'll abide in you, and I'll abide in the Father. He promises not to leave them as orphans, but says, I'll give you the Holy Spirit, who will guide you into all truth. He's preparing them for his leaving.

And it seems that Jesus is worried, actually. In our reading, he says, I have told you these things to keep you from stumbling. In this case, stumbling means something like giving up the faith when times get hard or dangerous or lonely. And there's ample reason to believe that they would stumble and suffer when Jesus is far, far away from them.

Maybe you feel like this now, that Jesus is far, far away from you. For most, our emotional and spiritual lives are so deeply intertwined that when we experience things like anxiety or depression or hopelessness, they just automatically connect to us spiritually, and it becomes nearly impossible to experience God in the present.

This fear of being alone, of being in danger of God being far away, makes us do all sorts of terrible things. And it's easy to name this afar of things that happen in the world, like wars being justified because of fear of lack of resources.

But it also happens more personally to us, too. I was just recently watching a video of a young man who couldn't have been more than 22 years old, and he was talking about how he was sort of dragged into this online cult. He didn't really understand how, but he started watching this famous influencer that he said at first was just saying sort of edgy things about masculinity and stuff that he found intriguing. And then after years of watching this person, he found himself thinking and even doing terrible things. And he had

a sort of conversion moment of sorts and he was of things when we're afraid that we're in danger or that will be alone.

And maybe this is not you. Maybe you're not a 22-year-old stuck in some online hyper-masculine cult. I hope not. If not, you can talk to me afterwards. I'll be happy to chat. Maybe you're not very afraid of danger or loneliness. Maybe you're one of the lucky ones, one of the few who never feels that God has ever left you or ever will.

I don't think the disciples were some of these lucky ones. How fearful they must have been these disciples of being lonely and in danger when their rabbi, their friend, their God says he's leaving and they are in certain danger. He does not give them false hope the way you might to an afraid child.

As a hospital chaplain, you're trained to never lie to a patient, even if you think it may make them feel better. If they or a family member asks, how's it going, is everything going to be okay, you have to say, I don't know. You can say truthful things, like they're in good hands or the doctors are working very hard, but you're trained never to lie.

Jesus is concerned that the pain the disciples would about, what they were about to feel, would make them fall away, but he tells them the truth anyway. He says, you will be kicked out of synagogues and killed by people who think that they're doing it for God.

But then Jesus says something strange that seems to go against this truth telling. He says, no, no, no, it's actually a good thing that I'm going to leave you. And it's the thing that no one wants to hear when they're afraid or in danger. The words seem to fall flat almost.

In her book, *Everything Happens for a Reason and Other Lies I've Loved*, Kate Bowler describes getting diagnosed with stage four cancer, and she really, for at least a hundred pages just writes about all the terrible things people say to her when they're trying to help, like honestly, and they just don't really know what else to say.

And maybe you have said these things, maybe I've said these things. There's no shame here, but as she's writing them, it's hard not to see the truth in it. She describes the spiritual platitudes, things like, look on the bright side, or God only gives his toughest battles to his strongest warriors. She describes what these spiritual platitudes feel like, that they're painful to hear.

Is this what Jesus is doing? We try to make people feel better, so we lie, these comforting lies, and it does seem that this is what Jesus is saying. Jesus says, it's better that I leave, because if I was here, I would have to be with you all the time, right next to you, for you to be able to receive my teaching, to be comforted by me. I'd have to be here bodily right next to you.

And the consolation he gives is he says, when I leave, I will send you the comforter, the advocate, the paraclete in Greek, the Holy Spirit.

The word can be translated many different ways, and it is, but in Greek it is paraclete, para meaning close by or near, and cleat coming from the word to send. In the creed, whenever it says, I believe in the Holy Spirit, we're not just saying, I believe the Holy Spirit exists generally. This is the paraclete, the one that is sent to be near you. When we say it, we should think something like, I believe in the one sent to be near me.

The Holy Spirit does so much more than this, of course. It's put right there in our New Testament text, and it's very dense, so I'll speed through it for you. It reveals truth to the world. It reveals sin that the world is committing. It reveals righteousness, what it means to be at one with God. It reveals judgment, and not just between people arbitrating right and wrong, but it reveals that evil powers in the world are already condemned. It reveals these truths that are hiding in the world right below the surface.

But are these just platitudes to make the disciples feel better? You won't be alone. You'll receive something better than if I was here. Kate Buller describes what it is like to have cancer and to just walk around in the world, to go to church, to get on the train, to go to the hospital, to get groceries. And she describes being able to see things that you can't quite see. She says, whenever you have this consciousness, this way of seeing, you see truths that other people just don't see. You can tell when other people are suffering deeply, even if they're not showing it.

And actually, they can see you too.

It's his way of seeing. She calls it the community of the suffering. That When you're aware of the truth, you can see things that other people can't, and that weirdly, you're never quite alone, even when your suffering makes you feel alone because you are a part of this community of suffering.

So what is the difference between the well-meaning people that say to Kate Boller, things like look on the bright side and God gives his toughest test to his biggest warriors, what's the difference between that and what she describes here as the community of the suffering? What makes Jesus' promise to send His Holy Spirit to be with us? Not just some spiritual platitude. What is the difference? I think that it's this. It's that they don't minimize the pain and they're true. That's it. They're not spiritual platitudes because they don't minimize the pain and they're true.

But all of that does not always feel true. It does not always seem that the Holy Spirit has been sent and now reveals sin in the world and reveals to us that evil has already been condemned. What are we worrying about? That does not always feel true. It feels at times like a spiritual platitude, ways to make us feel better about the suffering we currently experience. And so rather than dig in on that, we will end with this. It will feel fake. At times, it will feel like nice words to make ourselves feel better if we do not allow the deepest truth to settle into our being, the one that Jesus left with his disciples.

He says, I am sending you the comforter, the Holy Spirit, the paraclete, the one who is sent to be near you. You are not alone. You never were. You never will be. In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.
